

Consuming (through) the Other: Rethinking fat and Eating in BBW Videos Online

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Lavis, A 2015, 'Consuming (through) the Other: Rethinking fat and Eating in BBW Videos Online', *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 18, no. 3. <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewarticle/973>>

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Checked October 2015

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M/C Journal, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2015) - 'fat'

Consuming (through) the Other? Rethinking Fat and Eating in BBW Videos Online

<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/973>

Anna Lavis

A young woman in bikini bottoms and a vest top scrunched up to just below her breasts stands facing the camera. Behind her lies the neatened clutter of domestic space with family photographs arranged next to a fish tank. As this gently buzzes in its fluorescent pool of light, she begins to speak:

I've just finished eating my McDonald's meal, which was one of the new quarter pounders with the bacon and the cheese and ten nuggets and a large fries but I have not finished my drink.

Pausing to hold up her drink to the camera, she shakes the takeaway cup to assess how much remains inside. With her other hand she gently pats her uncovered stomach, saying:

I'm feeling very full and very tight on the top... very very tight like, here and here too... like a drum ...Very full! But I know that I can probably fit more with liquids so I'm going to top it off with the rest of this drink and then I'm going to fill in all the spaces with the rest of the drink.

After drinking the Dr Pepper before the screen fades to black, she says:

I think next time I gotta get the double quarter pounder. I probably could take it, I could probably take on that double quarter pounder with the nuggets. So I'll have to try that next time for you guys.

This video on You Tube is one of many on the Internet labelled BBW, which stands for Big Beautiful Woman. This term dates back to the 1979 launch of *BBW Magazine*, a fashion and lifestyle magazine for women. As it was then, BBW is also used within spaces of size acceptance, such as among the women participating in Alexandra Lescaze's documentary *All of Me*, which charts the lives of friends who met through the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. In such spaces, as on Internet blogs and discussion pages, BBW is employed to assert the desirability, rather than abjection, of a fat female body; it thereby counters the "stigma that still is associated with being a large person in a small society" as one of the women in *All of Me*, Dawn, puts it. BBW is also a term that features frequently in 'fat forums'. These are adult content cyberspaces for, as one homepage states, "plus size models and their admirers." Alongside these, there is also a genre of BBW pornography in which sexually explicit activity takes place. This is found on dedicated websites as well as in sub-sections of more 'mainstream' porn sites. In these latter the videos that feature BBWs are often labelled "fat fetish."

Against this background, this article draws on content analysis conducted between 2013 and 2015 of forty videos posted on You Tube by women who self-identify as fat (see Longhurst) and, specifically, as BBWs. In particular, it focuses on videos to which eating is central. In these, eating is either performed on camera or has taken place just before filming began. In the latter instance eating and its bodily resonances are visible in two

ways: the BBW might describe the meal just eaten or her feeling of fullness, or there may be a textual description such as “after a big mac.”

These videos have so far received little scholarly attention other than through a lens of sex, as enactments of “fat pornography” (cf. Kulick). Yet, analysing them as porn risks privileging an imagised rather than lived body and implicitly engaging only with a spectator’s viewpoint. It thereby potentially repeats the power dynamics it seeks to interrogate. This article instead suggests that there are key distinctions between these videos and porn. Although a discussion of gender and sexuality is precluded by limited space, focusing on eating offers a way to unpick this analytic conflation whilst also recognising how wider entanglements among sex, power and fat may texture the videos. As such, whilst being careful not to reduce the BBWs in these videos to no more than eating bodies, this focus seeks primarily to pay attention to their agency and embodiment.

Drawing on literature that has critically engaged with fat from a variety of perspectives (cf. Evans Braziel and LeBesco; Forth and Leitch; Rothblum and Solovay), this discussion is particularly shaped by recent work that has sought to take account of lived experiences of moving through and encountering the world with a fat female body (cf. Murray; Tischner). In order to think through this, the article reflects on the Internet as a space not only of visibility, but also of viscosity.

Defined by Robyn Longhurst et al. as “the sensations, moods and ways of being that emerge from our sensory engagement with the material and discursive environments in which we live” (334), viscosity has been argued to be a way in which to reflect on identity and power by paying attention to the materiality of everyday experiences (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, taste and visceral). It attends to the simultaneity of politics and intimacy as social relations are forged “at the level of the guts” (Probyn 1). In turn, recent attention to eating has suggested this to be an act that forges social connections at myriad scales (see Abbots and Lavis) as people, places and objects are brought into encounter by ingestion and digestion.

An attention to what eating is and does in these videos therefore recognises power dynamics between BBWs and viewing Others, whilst also not taking these to preclude other modalities of agency. It elucidates the co-production of bodily materialities and lived experiences, whilst also tracing the multi-directional slippages between consuming and becoming the Other. Engaging with affects and socialities set in motion by eating offers up a vision of this as an act that may be shared among bodies in ways at once disembodied but visceral.

Visuality

The homepage of a pornographic website describing itself as “the home of BBWs” suggests that the viewer click on links to see women

diving into the kinkiest fetishes and activities you’d ever want to see BBWs do! From face-sitting and squashing, to eating anything and everything, these big fat chicks do it.

It goes on to state that “these girls are massive, like their stomachs and appetites” and, illustrating assumptions regarding whose gaze is turned on this page, that “your dick won’t know what to do with itself!” The juxtaposition of the seemingly mundane, and also individual, activity of eating with overtly sexual and corporeally social activities such as face-sitting, suggests that to think through BBW videos focused on eating and trace their divergences from porn, we perhaps first need to attend to this wider landscape in which eating features as “kinky fetish”; it involves recognising

intersections as well as disconnects.

An undercurrent of sex does resonate through some of the eating videos posted on YouTube by BBWs. Although women are clothed and no sexual activity takes place, many of the titles contain the words "sexy BBW." Likewise, the language used by participants to talk about their bodies during or after eating is often sexually inflected. Just as the BBW above said of her Dr Pepper that she could "take it," others talk of being "filled" in a way that folds food into an imaginary of penetrative sex. Bodily boundaries are also shown to be porous in further ways as fat is described as "bursting out of trousers." A woman eating ice cream directs the camera downwards, saying, "look at that, my underwear's rolling right down [...] my tummy cannot be contained anymore."

Furthermore, to shift our analytic positioning for a moment, it is clear that the BBWs in these videos are regarded as sexually desirable by viewers. A YouTube video in which a woman eats a burger is accompanied by a viewer's comment:

Hello beautiful, I wish that I was there so I could do the fondling and caressing of your beautiful, fat belly while you just concentrated on eating your food.

This contrasts to other viewers whose derogatory comments range from the denigrating "you are so ugly and disgusting" to the rather less articulate "eww." These clearly highlight the "derision and even repulsion" (Lupton 3. See also Cain et al., Erdman Farrell) often directed at, especially female, fat. In contrast, by establishing a fat female – and indeed eating – body as desirable, these videos instead denote themselves as spaces of fat acceptance.

Self-identified BBW and adult actress April Flores links her work in porn films to a wider politics of fat acceptance, saying:

I want to have my work be a catalyst for change in people seeing fat women as sexual beings. Because we are, and we're not viewed that way. Right now, fat women are relegated to being the punch line and I want my work to change that. (Flores quoted in Wischhover)

Flores would seem to articulate a neoliberal narrative of pornography as female empowerment (see Gill) here and it is important to recognise the connections between this and a wider context of disempowerment and stigma. Yet, the power dynamics of gaining social and sexual acceptance through a desiring gaze are also problematic. They highlight, as Rachel Colls puts it, "what the risks are for fat, female bodies and a re-framing of fatness more generally when designating acceptance according to a particular space and to 'an' admiring audience" (19). This links the pornographic works of April Flores with the eating videos that are the focus of this article. In both spaces, being visually consumed by an Other is invested with the power to circumscribe one's own body as acceptable. In one video, a woman who has just finished eating pulls up her top to show her belly. Looking directly into the camera, she asks "do you like that?"

A well-known self-described BBW, Donna Simpson, has poignantly written about her decision to shut down her website after years of charging 19 dollars a month to watch her eat (Simpson). She states that "the bottom line is that it was a fantasy created for men [...] It's about control" (quoted in Rose). One way in which control manifested was in how largely-male members of her website not only watched her eat but also directed this, circumscribing what she did and did not put into her own body.

Although the financial transaction of the membership fee underpinned this access to Donna Simpson by offering the possibility of one-on-one video chats, there is some similar interaction afforded by the comments posted in response to the eating videos on YouTube. Beneath a video of a woman eating cake, one viewer has written "you're adorable" to which the BBW herself has replied "you're sweet! thank you." As such, accompanying these videos there are many requests from viewers centred on eating and food, along the lines of "eat this for me." These are sometimes responded to in follow-up videos or with links to a paying website like Donna Simpson's.

Such requests demonstrate diverse self-positionings on the part of viewers; the more overtly sexual, such as "eat me" and "I wish to be that cake," are joined by the expression of desire to be close to the BBW:

Wow you are one big sexy fatty with a Huge Blubber Belly!! that thing is soo sexy. I would kill to see you waddling to the buffet bar with your fat jiggling and leading the way.

But, to more explicitly address the problematic dynamics of power that have resonated through this discussion so far, these comments are commonly joined by a desire to feed the woman in the video. One viewer writes, "I'd love to get a huge funnel and tube and pour gallons upon gallons of beer down your throat and watch your belly expand!!" These words (at least seek to) intervene in and shape the body of the BBW to whom they are directed.

It has been suggested that food "and its relations to bodies is fundamentally about power" (Goody 37) and directions to "eat an éclair for me," for example, draw forth the power dynamics here by illustrating the co-production of corporeal materialities; the BBWs' body fat is (at least to a certain extent) made and mediated by viewers. Moreover, in this process, some viewers not only position themselves as feeders but also assume the existence of a feeder off-camera, thereby framing the woman's eating as always directed by an Other rather than autonomous. This aligns these videos with a wider context of feederism (see Giovanelli and Peluso) and this is sometimes made explicit; beneath one video, a viewer writes somewhat aggressively "your feeder's nice with you, you'd be twice that size with me."

The first half of this article has recognised the setting of these videos within a wider cyber-landscape of porn/power/fat/stigma entanglements. Yet, to suggest that although "the single most striking thing about this genre of pornography is that the women who are pictured do not engage in sex" (Kulick 79) and argue that they instead "have food" (79) reveals the problem with calling them porn and ending our analysis there. It defines the videos, and thus the women in them, through that which is absent, swapping sex for food. This risks repeating in analysis "the kind of harmful behavior in which men reduce fat women to sexual objects" (Saguy 553) by implicitly aligning with the viewer. To avoid this necessitates engaging with the BBWs themselves, their modes of embodiment and lived materialities. As Don Kulick notes, "most of the camera work is focused on their stomachs" (79) and it is here that such an engagement begins.

Viscerality

Reclaiming the ubiquitous imagery of "headless fatties" (Cooper) in media discussions of obesity, one video begins with a full-screen shot of a woman's stomach. The camera pans to reveal a box of chocolates balanced on her lap and a hand reaches down to take one. Over the next three wordless minutes, as her fingers move between half-glimpsed chocolate box and unseen mouth, the woman rubs her belly with her other hand, folding and kneading her fat before letting it tumble onto her thighs. In other videos BBWs hold their stomachs to the camera to show how "full of food," as one woman puts it, these

are. Others adjust their position, clothing and webcams to enable a better view of their stomachs, or as they are more habitually called, their “bellies.”

Rather than read this focus simply as a fetishisation of dislocated body parts, which echoes pornography, here bellies take on significance precisely because they are the “site of incorporation” (Carden-Coyne and Forth 1); they are indexical of eating. Momentarily altering our viewpoint to elucidate this, on the comment board of another video a viewer has simply written “digestion yeah!” Bellies, thus, gain meaning from eating rather than the other way around. This shift from visibility to viscosity draws us back to the viewpoint of the BBWs; their agency, pleasure and lived materiality is brought literally into the line of the camera.

In another video, a woman rubs her belly sensuously. To elucidate the contours of this embodied performance, the video’s tagline reads:

A family size lasagne a double milkshake a pound of butter melted in mash potatoes with a can of cheese for lunch wait till i get finished stuffing myself becoming fat is the ultimate pleasure.

This woman is not alone in asserting the pleasure of becoming fat. Juxtaposed with articulations of the pleasures of food, together these statements suggest that eating on camera is not so much directed outwards to a desiring gaze. Rather, it is turned inwards as women look down at their bodies, roll food around their mouths and lick their fingers. A video in which a woman eats in her parked car begins:

Okay, for lunch I’ve got some fried chicken; it’s two pieces with fries, and there’s lots of ketchup here... I also got a gravy and a macaroni salad to go with it... on yeah and I did pay an extra dollar for an extra piece of chicken so it’s three pieces of chicken.

Here the BBW’s eating and its pleasures map the space of this video as closed. Yet her simultaneous narration also opens up this savoured moment of ingestion to a listening and viewing Other. This suggests that it may be not so much bodies that are shared or desired in these videos (as they are in pornography, perhaps), but rather the act of eating itself; these spaces invoke a “mimetic desire” (Girard) to be in this food-consuming moment.

In another video a woman talks the viewer through the various flavours of cotton candy in her hand before deciding to try the pink vanilla. After taking a bite she offers this to the camera, saying, “you can eat that part [...] does it melt on your tongue?” Although the sharing of eating is verbally articulated here, there are many other instances in which this is less explicit but also present, as visceral viewing becomes a moment of eating from afar (Lavis). That viewers often leave comments such as “I can taste that burger” suggests that these videos engender “vicarious consumption” (Kirkwood) that may be a form of eating as affective as taking food into the mouth. As such, here we glimpse the multi-directional flows of agency, affect and sociality engendered by eating.

Recent explorations of eating bodies have seen these as entangled in myriad social and material relations. By engaging with eating as instigating encounters between bodies and worlds, this work has thereby argued that “in the act of placing food in the mouth, landscapes, people, objects and imaginings not only juxtapose with and fold into one another, but are also reconstituted and reordered” (Abbotts and Lavis 5. See also Probyn). Against this background, “vicarious consumption” (Kirkwood) offered by these videos folds the bodies of viewer and viewed together to reconfigure taken-for-granted

notions of outsides and insides, eater and eaten. Visceral viewing as embodied consumption recognises eating as an act that may be shared and thereby take place among many bodies at once.

It has been suggested that an attention to viscosity engages with "contextualized and interactive versions of the self and other" (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, visceral, 1273). As such, as consuming the Other slip-slides into becoming Other through mimetic eating, it is now viewers' bodily materialities that are affected and reshaped; their hungering, salivating bodies are mediated by the BBWs' moments of eating. In this reversal, our sense of the power dynamics of these videos shifts. As eating becomes shared and contingently and dynamically distributed across bodies, power too is dissipated between the actors that perhaps co-produce these (eating) spaces and bodies. Thus, these videos offer participants on both side of the lens the possibility of being caught up in affective flows, whilst also being "articulating subjects" (Probyn 17) who "reforge new meanings, new identities" (17) through eating.

Conclusion

By engaging with videos in which self-identified Big Beautiful Women eat online, this article has reflected on the diverse imaginings, socialities and flows of power that texture these spaces. Paying attention to eating has afforded an alternative view of these videos, challenging a pornographic reading by recognising other intimacies and affective connections. As such, this discussion has sought to re-prioritise the experiences and agency of the BBWs in the videos themselves, whilst also interrogating how their bodies may be patrolled and even produced by the gaze of Others. Thus, whilst being careful not to reduce the BBWs to no more than food – "dehumanised as symbols of cultural fear: the body, the belly, the arse, food" as Charlotte Cooper puts it – an attention to eating has responded to her suggestion to "try to get a hold of their humanity" in analysis. This article therefore set out to explore how a visceral attention might forge a more nuanced understanding of these videos. Yet, in so doing, it has also become clear that they inform wider theorisations of eating. Thinking through what eating is and where its boundaries lie in these spaces has illustrated that this is an act that may take diverse forms and be shared among bodies that are spatially and temporally apart. That the visceral viewing of an Other's ingestion and digestion may itself be a form of eating offers a novel way to think through contingent and affective connections among foods, bodies and persons.

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